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ABSTRACT

This paper, based on the author's experience as a superintendent of a successful Colorado school district, suggests means of strengthening a school district's public image. Simple measures are presented for (1) stimulating and maintaining parent involvement in district- and school-sponsored organizations, (2) improving communication with the general public, and (3) establishing good relations with news media. The concluding section outlines general rules for inspiring public confidence in education. (MCG)

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Remarks by

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HOW TO INCREASE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN YOUR SCHOOLS

"Proper reporting of public education can help strengthen your district's image. Here's how."

CLINIC A-4

Annual Convention Clinic Session
National School Boards Association

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HOW TO INCREASE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN YOUR SCHOOLS

It is an honor to have been asked to serve on a special interest clinic dealing with the topic "HOW TO INCREASE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN YOUR SCHOOLS." The sub-theme of this clinic is "Proper reporting of public education can help strengthen your district's image. Here's how." We have been informed that these sessions are designed to provide a forum for the exchange of useful, basic "how to" ideas.

I presume I was asked to serve as a panel member for this clinic because the Cherry Creek School District in Colorado enjoys a positive image, as evidenced by a variety of factors. You should know I represent a district that has grown from 8,000 students in the early 1970's to over 22,000 today. You should also know that we are experiencing areas of decline, stability, and growth which means we are consolidating schools, staffing small enrollment schools, and opening new schools on a year-round calendar to avoid future over-building.

What factors indicate support which comes from having a positive image? We have passed two consecutive tax increases for our general operating budget. We have never lost a bond election for school construction. We have had Board member incumbents run and win in the last four elections, in three of which they were unopposed. We have anywhere from 100 on up citizens attend each of our Board meetings. The current Superintendent -- me -- has been around for ten years. I submit these as evidence of a District which enjoys the confidence of its public.

So much for some quick background facts. Let me get on to the primary topic that is "How to strengthen your district's image." I wish to share with you some things we do which work for us. The list is not all inclusive nor in rank order. They may or may not work for you. Only you can judge what might work in your district to strengthen your image.

I should like to speak to the topic by sharing with you some things we do in Cherry Creek to build confidence in the District through (1) working with official parent organizations, (2) communicating with the general public, and (3) relating to the media. I should like to close my comments by stating what I believe to be the foundations or cornerstones of public confidence in education. Of necessity, these "how to" suggestions will merely be brief statements. They can be elaborated on during the question and answer period.

QUESTION ONE -- How can a school district strengthen its image through official parent organizations?

We assume in our District that meaningful and extensive involvement of the parent community through a parent organization structure is necessary, not just desirable, for a quality school system that has the public's confidence. In order for involvement to be "meaningful," it must be of such a nature so as to influence what happens in the teaching-learning process.

Here's how -- at the local building level:

1. Solicit parent volunteers to help in the local school.

2. Have parents serve on parent/teacher/administrator committees dealing with issues such as report cards, discipline and dress codes, safety concerns, goal setting, and more.

3. Be a regular, formal communication vehicle to the local community by sending newsletters, sponsoring programs, and more.

4. Be an informal sounding board from and for the community and the school principal.

5. Assist in carrying out supplemental-enrichment programs such as young audiences, story letters, Great Books, and more.

Here's how -- at the district level:

1. Have parents serve on committees to name new schools, select a principal, recommend boundary changes, and more.

2. Have an active district-level parent structure to help give leadership training to local parent organizations and provide programs of district interest.

3. Involve district and local parent organizations in budget workshops and elections, bond issues, support for or against general referenda, lobbying efforts, and more.

4. Have the district parent organization make most appointments of parents to district-level committees.

5. Have administrators attend their meetings.

QUESTION TWO -- How can a school district strengthen its image through how it communicates to the general public?

All school districts have at their disposal a variety of means to communicate with all residents of the district -- the general public.

Here's how:

1. Use the telephone properly -- crucial.

    * Return all calls or have them returned -- promptly.

    * In-service secretarial staff.

        - Don't ask "who is calling" before secretary says whether or not you are in.

        - You are either available or unavailable.

- Say "Yes, he is in. May I tell him who is calling?"

* Keep notes on calls returned but unable to complete.

2. Be available for personal face-to-face conferences.

3. Ask non-active parents and residents of the district with no children in the schools to serve on committees.

4. Use the mails properly.

   * Answer virtually all letters or have them answered.

   * In a "reasonable" length of time.

5. Have regular mailings such as "The Cherry Creek Communicator" and the high school newspapers.

6. Use professional outside help when necessary for such things as opinion surveys.

7. Encourage community use of schools.

8. Deliberately hold principals responsible for bringing residents with no children in the schools into their building.

9. Hold school board meetings in local schools rotating throughout the district.

QUESTION THREE -- How can a school district strengthen its image through how it relates to the media?

Much of a school district's image is obtained through the media, especially as held in the minds of the residents without children in the schools. A good working relationship with the media does not come naturally. One must work at making it so.

Here's how:

1. Be honest, don't lie.

   * If you are perceived by the media to be dishonest, that image will be conveyed on to the public.

2. Share ample data.

   * Provide media with full Board agenda.

   * Give personal handwritten notes to media.

   * Permit them to "check out" large, written reports.

3. Be accessible.

    * Anytime, but especially in times of crises which are considered by the media to be newsworthy.

    * Know their deadlines.

4. In times of crises, take time (not too much) to collect your thoughts and prepare comments.

5. Admit a mistake if you have made one.

    * Press will be understanding, forgiving, and humane.

    * May even turn bad news into good news.

6. Keep language simple.

7. Understand the role of the media.

    * They are not and cannot be the district's public relations arm.

    * They report the "unusual."

8. Be human yourself.

    * Show a sense of humor.

    * Admit, at times, you just don't know.

9. Do not play favorites. Treat all the media equally and fairly.

QUESTION FOUR -- What are some of the foundations and cornerstones on which is built public confidence in education?

There are many, but these are among the crucial ones to me:

1. Operate a good school program.

    * Most people must believe the students are being well educated at a reasonable cost.

    * Without a majority of people believing this, one has no basis for public confidence.

2. Meaningfully involve all residents of the district in the school.

    * Meaningful means their presence makes a positive difference -- they can see.

    * There are endless ways to do this.

3. Communicate in a wide variety of planned and formal ways.

4. Be open and honest in your communication. If you do, people will perceive you as a person they can trust -- in whom they can have confidence.

Without a good school program, without meaningful involvement, without planned communication, and without an image of being open, honest, and trustworthy, no district will ever have, nor should they, the public confidence.